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I'm honored to spend this time with an organization of your commitment and reputation.

I'm especially pleased that the opportunity came at this particular time. In a moment, I'll tell you why, but before I do I want to say a few words about the man who won the heart of all America and took it back to Rome.

The Pope's appeal cut right straight across religious lines, political lines, ethnic lines, every line you can think of...and the pundits are still trying to figure out why.

Charisma? Sure. Plenty of charisma. The man exudes strength and certainty. And he looks like a man who is not only at peace with his God--but at peace with himself. And that's a rarity these days.

There was the gentleness, too. John Paul is a living example of what Francis of Assisi meant when he said in gentleness lies strength.

But there had to be more. How else can one explain how people could disagree with the Pope on certain church matters but be so moved by his humanity?

I came across a paragraph in a column by Haynes Johnson of the Washington Post that's as good an explanation of the Pontiff's remarkable appeal as I've seen. I'd like to read it to you.

"You don't have to join his church, or share in his creed to salute the man and honor his essential message," Johnson wrote. "He preaches love and mercy and justice. When he says, in his heavy accent, 'dear br-r-r-others and sisters, I loff you,' this old American WASP, baptized an Episcopalian, confirmed a Congregationalist, and lapsed from any church in recent years, has to respond, along with many of his fellow citizens, 'I love you too.'"

I like to think Americans were hungry for that simple message of love and justice and mercy. I like to think the "Me" generation is getting tired--and maybe a little ashamed--of being so self-obsessed and self-indulgent.

"The poor of the United States and the world are your brothers and sisters in Christ," John Paul said. "You must never be content to leave them just the crumbs from the feast. You must take of your substance, and not just of your abundance, in order to help them."

I like to think his words struck home.

But the Pope said something else during his visit here, something that relates directly to how we Americans should take of our abundance in order to help those in need.

Of Americans' duty, he said: "It is then my wish that your sense of freedom may always go hand in hand with a profound sense of truth and honesty about yourselves and about the realities of your society."--unquote.

In context, it was clear that the "realities" the Pope meant included the reality of 25 million poor in a nation of affluence.

But in the last few years we have learned the truth about another harsh reality--inflation.

We have learned that inflation is the greatest enemy of human dignity and well-being. We have learned that inflation hurts every level of society, but hurts most those least able to meet the climbing costs of bare necessities--the poor, the sick, the old, those on fixed incomes.

We have also learned that while government spending is not the only cause of inflation, it is an important factor. If private spending for more than essentials is inflationary, the same is true for public spending. What I'm saying, then, is that every public dollar spent on social programs--however desirable--that are not absolutely critical to human welfare adds to inflation and thus hurts most the people those programs were meant to help.

Obviously this period of budgetary restraints on public spending for social needs puts a heavier obligation on organizations like yours. You must fill the vacuum. The challenge is to persuade the American people that while excess private or public spending is inflationary, giving is not only good for the soul of the giver, but good for the nation as well.

Now with regard to budgetary restraints on social spending, there is one more thing to be said:

This is not a head-on confrontation between fiscal prudence and social justice. It is an attempt to be prudent in order to do social justice. It is trying to do what Pope John urged us to do--to be profoundly truthful and honest about the realities of our time.

What is more, the budgetary savings made in one area are what make it possible to maintain and strengthen those social programs that are of truly critical importance.

I offer an example of one that is near and dear to the hearts of people like your own Monsignor Corcoran--the food stamp program.

Is there any doubt about the Carter administration's wholehearted commitment to the food stamp program?

One of the major accomplishments of this administration was reform of the food stamp program, always a good program but troubled in the past by inequities and administrative red tape. The reforms we've pushed through have eliminated many of these problems--and we've made a good program better.

We dropped the requirement that people buy food stamps. We've made sure that food stamps are going to the people who need them most. The number of elderly using stamps has increased by 32 percent and the percentage rate of participation has increased more in rural than in urban areas. Most important--the poorest of the poor are receiving help.

But the food stamp reform legislation is not only getting help to people who need it, it is giving us a more tightly operated program. We're cracking down on abuse. Breadwinners can no longer quit jobs and expect aid. People convicted of fraud are immediately dropped from the program.

Last spring, however, we found ourselves in a crisis: the food stamp program was certain to run out of money before the end of the fiscal year. If it did, we'd have to cut food assistance for over 18 million people. In short, because more people needed assistance and needed more of it, there would be less of it.

Congress lifted the statutory cap on spending for fiscal year 1979 but declined to remove the cap entirely. It did, however, appropriate the funds needed to avert a program shutdown at the end of this fiscal year.

Unfortunately, we could face an even worse crisis this fiscal year. The statutory cap for 1980 gives us only 75 percent of the funds we'll need. This means that if Congress doesn't approve our request for full funding, we'll have to start cutting benefits next spring. We face a particularly treacherous battle here because there is a very real possibility that Congress will attach strings to any additional funding. Those strings are likely to be in the form of regressive amendments that will cut food assistance for some of the poor and seriously complicate program administration.

Food stamp allotments are based on a diet intended only for use in emergencies and the average food stamp benefit is now only 35 cents per person per meal.

If unemployment rises--and with fuel costs soaring--this is not the time to cut back on food stamps. We think this program has already been cut back as far as it can be responsibly cut and we draw the line at further cuts in benefits. There's really no place left to cut benefits.

I've got a personal stake in this, and I want to tell you why. I've been Secretary of Agriculture for almost three years now, and I've had my share of ups and downs. But I think one of the satisfying moments occurred early last spring.

First a little background. In 1967 the Field Foundation sent a team of doctors into rural America. There they found many instances of swollen bellies, listless eyes and emaciated limbs--the tell-tale signs of children suffering from hunger and malnutrition.

In 1977, these doctors were sent back to the same areas. Nowhere did they see the evidence of the widespread malnutrition and hunger they had seen ten years before.

When these doctors testified before a Senate Committee they said, and I quote, "The food stamp program does more to lengthen and strengthen the lives of disadvantaged Americans than any other noncategorical social program." It is, they said, "the most valuable health dollar spent by the federal government."--unquote.

And now I'd like to turn to a subject that is very much on my mind these days, and, I gather, on your minds as well--the ownership, the control and the stewardship of America's farmland.

When Pope John visited Living History Farms near Des Moines, he told the farmers gathered to greet him, "You fulfill the command of God given at the very beginning: 'Fill the earth and subdue it.'"

The Pope made it clear that God said "subdue" the earth: He did not say to ravish it, to exploit it, or to monopolize it.

The land, as Scripture puts it, is to minister to all.

Now you have before you at this conference a draft statement on rural policy. It deals with many rural issues and challenges your ministry to respond to each of them. Among those issues is the question of The Common Good and Control of Land and Resources.

I have read this section with particular interest, because it marks the turning of still another major Catholic organization to the issue of what we call the structure of agriculture.

Earlier I had read the rural policy statements or position papers of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the U.S. Catholic Conference, and, more recently, the draft statement of the Midwest Bishops titled: "Strangers and Guests: Toward Community in the Heartland."

I want to take this opportunity to congratulate these organizations for taking up a subject so complex and controversial and for stating their positions with boldness and clarity.

As some of you know, the Midwest Bishops' statement--"Strangers and Guests"--has commanded considerable press attention since the open meetings to debate it have begun. That attention is certain to continue, because the issue is of national importance.

The major concern of all of these Catholic organizations is the growing concentration of land ownership and the demise of smaller family farm operations.

Quite obviously the preliminary statements now under debate lean hard toward policies that would help preserve the smaller operations and stop the long-time trend toward fewer but larger farms.

You share a belief that has persisted since Colonial times--the belief that land ownership makes for a strong citizenry, and that the wide dispersal of land ownership not only insures the proper stewardship of that precious resource, but strengthens the nation itself.

It is not important that your organizations and I agree on every rural policy recommendation--or even on every goal.

What is important is that these major church organizations and the present Secretary of Agriculture have independently concluded that now is the time to assess how well our present structure of agriculture is functioning, what influences it, and how well or how poorly it can adapt to the challenges and problems of the future.

Now what do I mean by "structure" of agriculture. It's a hard term to define, but in brief "structure" involves the characteristics, the organization, the control, the condition and the course of America's farm system.

Why have I concluded that now is the time to conduct these considerations?

Because we are free for the moment from any truly pressing crises in agriculture. For the first time in many decades, the structure's productive resources are in near balance with the domestic and export demands made upon it. As a result, farm prices are relatively stable, farm income is rising, and farmers have more flexibility under the law than they have had for many years.

At the same time--and in no small part because public policy encouraged rural economic development--the countryside is enjoying a remarkable revival that, among other things, is providing farmers with off-farm jobs that give them a chance to earn enough to stay on the farm and in their home communities.

Nevertheless, there are major and mounting concerns about the capacity of our present structure to accommodate what promises to be new and decidedly different challenges tomorrow.

The demise of small farms and the growth of fewer and bigger farms continues, though at a slower rate.

There are those who believe that if this trend goes unchecked much longer, agriculture as we know it will be no more--that it will become a monolithic industry owned and controlled by an elite landed gentry.

If that happens, young people who want to enter farming will have even less chance of doing so than they have today. And today the barriers of cost are already almost insurmountable.

Some also wonder what this might ultimately do to the rural community--to the small towns and villages where family farm agriculture is still important in economic and in social terms. And what it will do to traditions and to values as old and as venerable as the nation itself.

Will this trend finally abate as the average farm size reaches the point of optimum production efficiency...or will the inflation spiral that has pushed the price of so much land beyond its productive value extend and accelerate it by making capital gains speculation more attractive than farming for profit.

And what about some of the other major problems looming for agriculture in the immediate years ahead?

We know there are going to be even greater demands put upon our food producing capability. But how will an inelastic land base handle that demand? How will the shortage of fuel, growing concerns about harm to the environment, a falling water table, and slim chances of any major production technology breakthroughs affect an agriculture that is now so land-expansive, energy-intensive, fertilizer and pesticide-intensive, in some areas water-intensive, and technology-intensive?

The ultimate question is whether public policy--carefully tailored and judiciously applied--can help American agriculture meet these new problems and challenges.

Early this spring I called for an effort unprecedented in scope to find the answers to these and many other questions about American agriculture.

I invited farm organizations, rural life organizations, public interest organizations, land grant colleges, church groups, and individual authorities to join with the Department of Agriculture in conducting an intensive review and appraisal of the current structure of agriculture, and to carry out a new research agenda.

The goal is to compile the most comprehensive, reliable and up-to-date agricultural data bank ever assembled; to solicit the broadest range of opinion; and to hold a nationwide public dialogue to identify and debate whatever trade-offs may be necessary to reach a consensus on policy recommendations that are just, fair and promise to be effective.

The findings and recommendations--including those that will be offered at ten regional public meetings I'm going to chair beginning next month--will be turned over to the policymakers.

Our hope is that this material will help those policymakers come up with farm, tax, credit, trade, environmental, energy and government regulation policy that is full-dimensioned...that is anticipatory instead of reactive...and that is far more responsive than in the past to the marked diversity in farms, farm operations, farm problems and farm needs.

My hope is that organizations such as yours--organizations that have already demonstrated such a keen interest in this matter, organizations with such a deep commitment to social and economic justice--will give us your opinions and your recommendations.

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